

## Living Together: interaction, intercultural understanding and adaptation in a multi-nationality postgraduate community

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ISANA Conference, 4-7 December 2012



## Why student accommodation?

Most research focuses on students in the classroom (hardly surprising, since most research is carried out by academics)

Most research focuses on 'international students' or students from one country

Little research considers the host county student perspective

Little research considers the student community perspective

However, claims have been made that residential environments are ripe with possibilities for intercultural interaction

So what does it actually feel like to live and socialise with students from all round the world?

And why study this particular residential environment?



## We have contact

Is contact simply about bringing people together (the 'naïve' version of the contact hypothesis, Allport 1954)?

To lead to greater cultural awareness, openness, understanding and respect for difference, contact must be sustained, of equal status, interdependent and have institutional support

Meta-analysis of 516 studies (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006) found that friendship with people from other groups covers all the conditions of the contact hypothesis. Also, that affective mediators (ability to empathise, reduction in feelings of anxiety in dealing with the unfamiliar) are more successful than cognitive mediators (increased knowledge) in reducing prejudice

Does this mean that education to encourage global citizenship is likely to be ineffective without direct contact with other cultures?



## *Intercultural or intergroup?*

Social identity 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel 1974)

Is the importance of 'culture' overstated – there are many and various issues influencing people's lives and identities

Can taking an *intergroup* perspective help avoid the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Van Oord 2008) that *intercultural* encounters are 'fundamentally problematic, ... a nuisance at best and often a disaster' (Hofstede 1986)

Important not to downplay social and interpersonal differences, and not to focus primarily on national identity



## Previous research on residences

Some students prefer to live with others of the same nationality to help combat loneliness (Sawir *et al.* 2008)

Students often passively wait or simply hope for interaction to randomly occur (Kudo & Simkin 2003)

Initial phases of residence together may be 'cognitively exhausting' and therefore discourage further interaction (Trail *et al.* 2009)

Where encouragement towards interaction occurs, host country students may be more satisfied that significant amounts of interaction has occurred than overseas students (Todd & Nesdale 1997)

Intercultural interaction is often thought to happen by osmosis, simply by being in a place with people from different cultures (Halualani 2008)



## Food & Dining

Living together also involves eating together (or at least cooking and eating in areas while being physically co-located)

Food holds a 'central importance in creating and maintaining social relations, both within and between cultures, and food preferences [are] ... intimately connected with individual, group and national identity (Bourdieu, 1986; Fischler, 1988)' (Pearson-Evans 2006)

Food choices can be used to control feelings of alienation or can also indicate how well someone is adjusting to the new environment



## Friendship

It is often said that overseas students 'stick together', due to 'cultural factors'

Difficulties in developing friendships across cultures are often associated with language proficiency, making assumptions based on nationality or culture, perceived and actual attitudes of host country students

Native and non-native speakers may feel their identity is limited due to language difficulties, for example including the use of colloquialisms, references to popular culture, and a lack of effort by native speakers to adjust their language (e.g. Dunne 2009; Brown 2009; Leask 2009; Peacock & Harrison 2009)

However, particularly over time cross cultural friendships do occur. Similarities in attitudes and interests become more important, cultural differences less so



## The research

An ethnographic interview study of home and overseas students who had been resident for at least 9 months at the time the study started

Students were interviewed on 2 or 3 occasions over the course of 3 -15 months

Interviews were transcribed and analysed on an ongoing basis

Due to the significant amount of research indicating that many overseas students are unhappy with the level of interaction with host country students, students who had been seen to have some level of engagement in various college activities were invited to take part

A bit about the site of research – there are approximately 550 postgraduate student residents, 85% on one-year programmes, 80%+ from outside the UK, one third of residents from PRC



## Trying to interact

- 'They don't want to open up too much.'
- 'I never see him in the flat.'
- 'They dominate the space.'
- 'They always stick together.'
- 'They're not really interested in getting to know other students.'
- 'They don't really seem very approachable or friendly.'
- 'They don't like going to different types of events.'
- 'I can't find anything to talk to them about.'

We probably recognise a lot of these comments as being made by home students about overseas students.

These comments were made by overseas students about home students.



## In the bar

### Dancing (1)

H2 'Europeans they just stay there, cool, observe, drink, and then after they get tipsy they will dance' on the other hand 'Asians don't care, if I'm going to dance they just go dance ... no matter whether we're drunk or not'

A UK student explained that British students would be put off by someone dancing well:

H2 And I kind of get what he meant, because he said that, he's kind of given me an impression that, you know, like, just move your hips, you know, move your head, that would be like normal people, human beings dancing, know what I mean?



### Alcohol

H4 I think be able to drink some alcohol is helpful, for example if you want to make some friends obviously, you know, um. And also, I think it's quite important skill for people to have, in order to socialise with people, no matter whether in China or here, yeah, because in China for example the main way to really get things done is through dinner, dinners, let's say, and um, when we have dinner we will drink alcohol, very strong Chinese liquor, but over here people don't eat while people are drinking. ... I realised that drinking too much is not good, but be able to drink a little bit alcohol, it's definitely quite helpful.

## In the kitchen

### Cooking & eating together

Difficulties can occur when social habits from home are replicated in the college environment. Marie points out that in China 'social life is more private' and that it's common even in a restaurant for people 'to have a private place to have dinner together'. This can lead to other students in the flat feeling excluded, as Fiona explains about her Chinese flatmates:

'once there were all the flatmates, all 4 of them, sitting together having dinner, invited friends. I was standing in the kitchen, no one was talking to me, I felt invisible' (F2).



### However ...

Fiona seems unaware that other students, make similar comments about Indian and Pakistani students

F2 I mean, I guess it would look like that. The only reason we don't approach others is first of all we feel that they somehow don't want us to communicate with them, we feel they get like intimidated, ..., and sometimes we just feel that maybe they don't want us to talk to them, so we don't

Fiona's response suggests that she perceives her Chinese flatmates would not appreciate an invite to join her for dinner, because they have not invited her, which could lead to a cycle in which they become more and more isolated from each other.

Also, Fiona didn't have 4 Chinese flatmates ...

## In the gym

### Dancing (2)

Marie was a member of the university dance team (mainly undergrads), but initially experienced difficulties finding a regular partner, at first dancing with the only other overseas student who was a team member. She believes that members of the team may prefer to dance with people they perceive as being similar to them, and as one of only two Asians, Marie says 'I felt like I'm an alien (laughs)'. As it became clear how proficient Marie was, she finally found a UK student to dance with, and they entered a number of student competitions.



### In the gym

Marie was also a keen user of the college gym.

M2 I remember I went to the gym alone, and I was on the running machine on this side, and there is another girl, of course she's non-Chinese on the other side, and a non-Chinese came in and take the middle, and he look at me, then he look at her, then he decide to talk to her first. So I was thinking, you know, because you know according to their conversation just very common, you know because they just arrived this place and they wanted to know new people. Finally he chose the maybe the similar appearance people to talk. Actually I was thinking maybe when they are looking for friends, they are looking for the common

## In student committees

### Encouraging Engagement

A significant level of overseas student engagement in student organisation, especially on student committees, is unusual. At the time of the study, the main student committees (the student association and the intercultural association) were very mixed ethnically, with overseas students in senior elected or appointed positions.



### What happened ...

Being involved in a sports team is very different to running a student organisation  
It's also very different to being friends with someone

All agreed the committee should be run democratically ...

But what does democratic mean?

Does 'freedom of speech' = 'the truth'?

How many different cultural expectations are students required to adapt to?

Should the committee censor ideas which might cause offence?

To what extent should cultural sensitivity impact on the core beliefs of the host country community?

## Addressing the issues

Westernisation?

A place of liberation?

The importance of academic identity

The illusion of intercultural interaction

Support is necessary, but not sufficient

The meaning of multiculturalism

Providing opportunities for reflection

Strengthening institutional support



Thank you for your time

**ANY QUESTIONS, COMMENTS?**



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